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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that identified school-district attributes that attract and hinder women who apply for a superintendent position. Data were derived from a survey that was sent to approximately 200 female subscribers to the Washington Association of School Administrators professional job listing service. The response rate is not specified. Respondents identified five district attributes that were most likely to attract female candidates to the superintendency: (1) a good match between district needs and individual skills and abilities; (2) a stable, visionary, and proactive board; (3) the ability to implement new programs; (4) a stable financial outlook for the district; and (5) favorable potential for district success. They viewed the following as presenting significant barriers to securing the superintendency--sex role stereotyping, sex discrimination in recruitment and selection, few appropriate female role models, and a lack of sponsorship or mentorship. A conclusion is that educational leaders must work to remove barriers and promote those district attributes that encourage women applicants to the superintendency. (LMI)

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Female superintendents: Attributes that attract and barriers that discourage their successful applications

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Female superintendents: Attributes that attract and barriers that discourage their successful applications

Public school administration suffers from persistent shortages of females. In Washington there is a growing discrepancy between the demand for female school administrators and the supply of candidates willing to apply for leadership positions. This imbalance is especially acute for the position of school district superintendent.

Washington State leads the nation in the percentage of females occupying the position of school district superintendent, however, the percentage remains low compared to their male counterparts. While the number and percentage of female superintendents has increased slowly at the national level, there are indicators that Washington female superintendents are increasing at a greater rate. Nationally, 6.7 percent of superintendent positions are filled by females, compared to 15 percent in Washington.

Female leaders in Washington demonstrated steady improvement in securing a school district superintendency over the past three years. In 1989, 8 percent (n=24) of the 296 school districts were headed by a female superintendent. By 1991, that figure increased to 13 percent (n=39), and in 1992 it rose to 15 percent (n=43), an all-time high for female superintendents in public education. However, many of these positions remain in small schools and often include the multiple duties of superintendent, principal, and teacher.

Superintendent turnover in Washington continues to increase, reaching a ten-year high of 20 percent (n=57) during the 1992 school year. This number is expected to stay strong into the next decade, reflecting current mobility patterns, projected retirement rates, and early retirement incentives. However, the supply of female administrative applicants to fill the documented demand for open positions is expected to fall short based on current certificate completion patterns and the size of applicant pools for recent superintendent openings.

EA 025246

Who will lead our schools into the 21st Century? Will females continue their recent success into the superintendency? What are the identified attributes that attract a greater number of female applicants? What barriers exist for female applicants? The answers to these and related questions are addressed in this study.

Attributes of a District that Attract Female Candidates

A recent study (Sharratt and Townley, 1991) investigated why administrative candidates were applying for some leadership openings and not others. Participant responses followed patterns that were both work-experience and gender-related. Those respondents with more total years of experience viewed reasons for seeking administrative positions differently than those candidates with fewer years. Experienced candidates sought administrative positions in districts with a history of stable leadership, steady student enrollment growth patterns, and low board member turnover. Candidates with fewer years of experience were more likely to pursue districts which were seeking immediate change, had a history of both administrative and board turnover, and were less financially stable.

Female applicants were attracted to administrative positions in districts that actively recruited females, provided professional growth opportunities, offered competitive salaries, allowed for a greater degree of autonomy, and had a "proactive" board of directors. Other factors contributing to female applications were geographical location, quality of life associated with the new location, and greater status found in the new position.

While this earlier study examined the reasons why candidates applied for some administrative openings and not others, it did not specifically address the characteristics of a district that encouraged females to apply. In addition, the Sharratt and Townley (1991) study did not investigate identified barriers which prevented females from attaining the superintendency.

Identified Barriers Which Block Female Candidates

A literature review of the barriers faced by females in school administration reveals two well documented conclusions. First, barriers do exist for females who are attempting to secure a superintendent's position. Second, once organizational or societal barriers are removed, females aspire to administrative positions.

Charol Shakeshaft (1985, 1987) identified the male-centered idealogy of androcentrism or patriarchy as the underlying cause of all barriers for females. Her work suggests the major barrier to females has been a culture characterized by male dominance. Barriers can be linked to a society that supports and enforces male superiority and a masculine value system in which female values, experiences, and behaviors are viewed as inferior.

The documented barriers identified in the Shakeshaft research were gender/role stereotyping and socialization, career socialization, organizational characteristics, devaluation of the female perspective, family responsibilities and lack of mobility, and the fear of reprisal for acknowledging aspirations (Shakeshaft, 1985). On the other hand, the undocumented barriers include: incompetence or lack of ability, low self-image, low self-confidence, and lack of aspiration or motivation on the part of females.

Shakeshaft further identified a number of overt and covert barriers. Overt barriers consisted of discriminatory practices and competency beliefs, i.e., any male may be preferable to a competent minority or female. Covert practices included: lack of support, encouragement, and counseling; lack of formal preparation; limited administration or "learning experiences;" role conflict; lack of role models; lack of sponsors or mentors; and limited access to vacancy networks.

Methodology

During the spring of 1993, a survey was sent to approximately 200 female subscribers to the WASA professional job listing service. This subscriber list consisted of superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, coordinators, principals and others within the administrative structure. Approximately nine in ten were currently employed in Washington, with the remaining subscribers residing within the Pacific Northwest region.

Participants were asked to provide demographic information regarding total years of experience, educational attainment, current position, and career goals. They were asked to identify characteristics of a district, the superintendent's position, or the board of directors that "encouraged" their application.

Additionally, respondents were requested to complete a discrepancy model questionnaire regarding the "barriers" they believe exist that keep them from securing a superintendency. The discrepancy model was used to determine the difference between "what is" and "what ought to be" with regard to identification of the self-reported barriers for females attempting to attain the position of school superintendent.

Findings

Attributes of a district

The findings from this study suggest there were five common attributes of a district that are likely to "attract" or have a "strong" influence on a female candidate's willingness to apply for the superintendent's position. These five attributes surfaced as the "most influential" regardless of the respondent's position, i.e., superintendent, assistant superintendent, central office staff, principal, in-state or out-of-state. The five most influential attributes are shown in rank order in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Rank ordering of the five most influential attributes that attract female superintendent applications
1. A good match between the district needs, your skills and abilities
2. Stable, visionary, proactive board
3. Ability to implement new programs
4. Stable financial outlook for the district
5. Potential for district success is good

In-state female respondents also identified district size, geographical location, reputation of the district, good administrative team, and board and community relations as important to their decision to apply for the superintendent's position. However, none of these was viewed as "strongly influential" as a total population of respondents. For out-of-state females the issues of geographical location and board and community relations were viewed as important to their decision to apply, along with those items identified in Table 1.

Barriers to the Superintendency

A series of t-tests was performed to determine if a significant difference ($p. < .05$) existed between "what is" and "what ought to be" for 10 research identified statements on the barriers for females seeking a superintendency. The results indicated that a significant difference ($p. < .05$) existed for four of the statements between "what is" and "what ought to be." These four statements are presented in Table 2 in rank order.

TABLE 2

Rank ordering of the four barrier statements identified as significant (p. < .05) for females in securing a superintendent's position

1. Sex role stereotyping
2. Sex discrimination
3. Availability of appropriate female role models
4. Availability of sponsorship or mentorship

Other statements identified as strong barriers, but not significant (p. < .05), were encouragement from other female administrators, availability of networking with other females, and encouragement from male administrators. Statements that were identified as low barriers by respondents included appropriate training and preparation experience, applicant's lack of self-confidence, and family and home responsibilities.

Implications

A substantial shortage of school administrators is projected in the next decade. The quality of the school governance depends, in large part, upon the active recruitment and selection of qualified females and minority candidates to fill these openings. However, current practices suggest that qualified females are systematically overlooked or blocked from access to leadership positions by the lack of encouragement, incentives, or support for choosing to enter the profession.

School district superintendent search committees and boards of directors should actively recruit females by marketing themselves in a manner which reflects the findings from this

study. Those attributes that attract females should be promoted in job announcement brochures and personal discussions with search committee consultants and professional association leaders.

One of these identified attributes includes promoting the importance of a "good match" between the district needs and the skills and abilities of the applicants. Qualified candidates are looking at an interview as a two-way street. District selection committees should not only determine through the interview process how the candidate can fulfill their dreams for an effective school district, but also how they can convince the candidates that the district will help them fulfill their dreams as well. Finding the "right" match between district needs and the skills and abilities of the superintendent candidate is the single most important component to long-term district success.

One effective way for boards to ensure a complementary "match" is to promote the other identified attributes drawn from this study. This includes acknowledging the board as a stable, visionary, and proactive team. Most female candidates are interested in board stability in order to implement new programs. Without this stability, risk-taking and change initiatives are not as likely to be forthcoming.

Females are also attracted to districts that demonstrate a stable financial outlook and believe in their potential for continued success. Those districts capable of promoting these attributes will enlist larger numbers of female applicants.

Furthermore, a significant number of females report discouragement when applying for superintendent openings because of perceived barriers. These barriers may be overt or covert, but the message is the same--females need not apply. Boards of directors and superintendent search committees interested in attracting females must first examine their beliefs and practices which may negatively portray females. Findings from this study suggest that sex role stereotyping and sex discrimination are viewed by females as presenting significant barriers.

Recruitment and selection procedures are particularly vulnerable to discriminatory practices. Documented examples are shown in Table 3:

Table 3

Examples of Discriminatory Practices in Recruitment and Selection Procedures

- Recruiting through "word-of-mouth" and the "old-boy" network.
- Questioning applicants about children or marital status.
- Using criteria with unproven validity as predictors of success, such as requiring a specific length of experience in a specific position.
- Permitting men to skip steps on the career ladder but expecting women to complete each one.
- Asking women irrelevant questions about child care or how male subordinates might react to them.
- Focusing upon the applicant as a woman, rather than as a qualified professional as in "Why would such a bright and attractive woman ever want to be a superintendent?"
- Regarding an aggressive manner in men as desirable but regarding women who display such traits as unfit.

Females report that a lack of sponsorship or mentorship further discourages their advancement to the superintendency. Mentoring is defined as guidance, training, support, and one-on-one counseling both formal and informal. Sponsorship, on the other hand, includes active endorsement and promotion of a candidate. Findings from this research suggest that mentoring and sponsorship are strategies which may eliminate barriers. School districts, professional associations, higher education and state policy makers all share responsibility for mentoring. Table 4 describes some possible mentoring strategies (U.S. Dept. of Ed. 1992).

Females in this study also report a lack of appropriate female role models as an impediment to obtaining the superintendency. Mentoring and sponsorship can lead to an increase of available female role models.

Table 4
Mentoring Strategies for Advancement
School District Responsibilities Require that all new administrators have a mentor Require that mentors be trained Encourage current administrators to become mentors
Professional Association Responsibilities Develop and house mentor programs in regional centers Provide mentors to assist school districts
Higher Education Responsibilities Develop training programs for mentors Provide research and evaluation data on administrative mentoring programs
State Policymaker Responsibilities Fund a mentor program for all new administrators

Conclusion

Significant numbers of qualified women are facing obstacles to the superintendency. Establishing a pool of talented leaders is paramount. Female applicants face barriers and are often systematically overlooked or blocked from access to leadership positions. Improving

access for women to the superintendency includes an emphasis on factors which attract skilled leaders to a district.

Educational leaders must work diligently to remove barriers and promote those attributes of a district that encourage female applicants. The success of their efforts will ensure a productive future for our schools and children.

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